

Remarks of Ambassador Joan A. Polaschik “Regional and International Cooperation to Fight Terrorist Financing”

Algiers, May 2, 2016

Mr. Mokhtar Lakhdari, Director of Criminal Affairs and Pardon at the Algerian Ministry of Justice, dear colleagues, and distinguished members of the delegations from Algeria, Mali, Mauretania, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia, good morning and welcome. It is an honor to be with you today. On behalf of the United States, I thank the Government of Algeria and the Algerian Ministry of Justice for hosting this conference, entitled “Regional and International Cooperation to Fight Terrorist Financing.”

As you know, terrorist financing comes in many possible forms. In particular, this workshop focuses on one of these possible forms: the proceeds of drug trafficking.

Why this focus? Why does this potential link create a special problem? Drug trafficking and terrorism have certain similar characteristics. Both are lethal and socially destructive. Both are complex, international phenomena that transcend national borders. Both rely on sophisticated organizations and networks.

International bodies have recently made observations about the links between drug trafficking and terrorist financing. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2253, from last December, focused on Daesh, Al-Qaida and their affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa. That resolution noted that the means of financing terrorism include, among other things, “the use of proceeds derived from crime, including the illicit cultivation, production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and their precursors.” The Financial Action Task Force or FATF, as well as the MENA-FATF, the FATF-style body for this region, have also reported these links.

We can all agree that when two deadly forces combine, the danger increases even more. Any connection between drug trafficking and terrorist financing poses an unwelcome threat that we must work to prevent and dismantle. So we begin this conference with an effort to understand the problem, and to understand about how best to address it. What are the appropriate law enforcement responses? How can we cooperate to prevent or disrupt these links?

The answers are not the same in every country or in every region. It is therefore important that the countries in this region join together – to share observations, to share good practices, and to coordinate responses. New forms of criminal coordination require new forms of law enforcement coordination. In this way it is essential that we stay ahead of our adversaries and win at the game of coordination, both in terms of international assistance, and in terms of cooperation and information sharing within each government’s law enforcement community. There is always room to improve and to innovate in this area – for example, the innovative joint border post being discussed by the customs administrations of Algeria and Tunisia. This is why we are gathered here today. Even if your country has not observed significant links between drug trafficking and terrorism within its borders at this time, you can benefit from the experience of your neighboring countries.

Gathering together to address these issues provides an opportunity for law enforcement to use its counter-narcotics tools to identify and fight terrorist financing. It also provides an opportunity to consider how best we can cooperate regionally and internationally to combat both threats at once. As you engage in what I am sure will be useful and productive dialogue throughout this conference, I would like to offer three considerations to your discussions.

First, to be effective, a discussion of regional cooperation must focus on partnership. Drug trafficking is a worldwide trade, based on global factors of supply and demand. The routes used by criminals to transport narcotics have countries of origin, transit, and destination. So do the routes used by criminals for the transfer of funds. Our discussion at this workshop should focus on the facts and trends associated with drug trafficking, and on how we can work together to disrupt these routes and prevent drug proceeds from funding terrorism. If we become distracted with attributing blame, and fail in our task of cooperation, we play into the hands of criminals and terrorists.

Second, we must acknowledge that the question of the links between drug trafficking and terrorist financing is a complex one. Although we are confronting international criminal networks, there will be differences in the experience and observations of each country and region. We must pay attention not only to the links between these two activities, but also to the important differences. If we simply treat the two as one and the same, we risk creating confusion and undermining our credibility.

Third, regardless of the crime being investigated, law enforcement methods must respect human rights and the rule of law. As noted by the Global Counterterrorism Forum, “counterterrorism efforts can best succeed when they are grounded in human rights obligations and the rule of law.” The same is true for counter-narcotics efforts. We must not lose sight of the values we are trying to secure and protect.

With all of you here at this workshop, there is great opportunity. I am certain that the practitioners gathered in this room today will have practical and creative solutions to the difficult questions we confront. We are all in a position to learn from each other.

I hope each of you derives benefit from the exchange of information and ideas over the next three days. I look forward to learning the good practices that arise from your discussions. Thank you for your time and for your commitment.

Thank you very much. All the best.